Megatonnage-Gap Prediction Draws Pentagon Rebuttal

By George C. Wilson
Washington Post Staff Writer

The United States soon will face "a massive megatonnage gap" because of the growing power of the Soviet nuclear arsenal, a private study panel comprised mostly of retired generals said yesterday.

The Pentagon immediately issued a rebuttal which promises to enlarge the debate on the relative strengths of the U.S. and Russia. The Pentagon said megatons are "a very incomplete indicator of military strength."

Chairman of the panel was Gen. Bernard A. Schriever, who headed the Air Force Systems Command until retiring last August. The American Security Council sponsored the study, while the House Armed Services Committee put out the report as information rather than an expression of its views.

"The preponderance of evidence," the Schriever panel said, "points to the conclusion that the Soviet Union is succeeding in its massive drive toward strategic military superiority and that the United States is cooperating in this effort by slowing down its side of the arms race."

Data Unclassified

Stressing that it based its findings only on unclassified information, the panel said Russia will catch up with the U.S. this year in the amount of nuclear megatonnage it can shoot at the U.S. and NATO allies. One megaton is equal to the blast force of one million tons of TNT.

After 1967, the panel said, Russia appears certain to pull far ahead of the U.S. in megatonnage. The study group gave these estimates of megatonnage the U.S. and Russia could shoot at each other, using bombers, missiles and submarines:

1962—U.S. had between 25,000 and 50,000 megatons compared to 6000 and 12,000 for Russia.

1967—U.S. has between 8000 and 29,000 megatons; Russia between 16,000 and 37,000 megatons.

1971—U.S. will have between 6000 and 15,000 megatons; Russia between 30,000 and 50,000 megatons. "It appears that a massive megatonnage gap will have developed," the panel said.

The Pentagon's public affairs office issued this rebuttal:

"The Department of Defense bases its weapon decisions on the needs of the United States, considering national objectives and all relevent factors. It does not base its decisions simply on the ratio of numbers or megatonnage of American weapons to the weapons of other countries.

"The first American need is to have forces that will deter a nuclear attack on this country by being unquestionably able to destroy the attacker in a retaliatory strike. The present American strategic forces are capable of doing this. The improvements we are planning will insure that we retain this capability indifinitely.

"It is most important to be clear that numbers of weapons and size of warheads alone are a very incomplete indicator of military strength. True military capability results from numbers of weapons that are accurate and reliable, that can survive an enemy attack and that can penetrate enemy defenses. The United States has and will continue to have more than enough of such weapons to convince any enemy that an attack on this country would be suicide."

The issue thus turns on the new nuclear math of Defense Secretary Robert C. McNamara. He rejects the notion that the number of H-bombs can be equated with military strength.

Enough is enough, under McNamara's math, when the U.S. has the number of nuclear weapons to do two things: (1) show an aggressor an attack would be suicide; (2) destroy him if he goes ahead and attacks anyway.

Building beyond that point, in McNamara's view, does not buy any more military security for the U.S. So his strategy has been to stress quality rather than quantity in the nuclear arsenal.

The U.S. megatonnage drop since 1962 stems from phasing out B-47 bombers and the intermediate-range U.S. missiles that were stationed in Europe.

The ICBM force has been set at 1000 Minuteman missiles, backed up by 656 missiles on Polaris submarines. The aging B-52 fleet of 600 bombers is the rest of the nuclear backbone. The comparatively few Titan missiles and B-58 bombers are on their way out.

Accuracy Stressed

The Pentagon is concentrating on getting more accuracy out of its present missiles and equipping them with all kinds of gadgets to penetrate enemy defenses.

One system under development, MIRV for (multiple independently - targetable reentry vehicles), amounts to cutting a missile's nuclear warhead into several parts and sending each of the individual bombs to different targets.

The Schriever panel, while not mentioning MIRV, said "the Soviets are aggressively moving forward on the frontiers of strategic weapon technology."

Panel members included Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, retired Air Force chief of staff; Dr. Edward Teller, nuclear physicist, and retired Army Gen. Paul D. Adams.